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THE HOUND OF CULAIN



*Marvelous and terrible was the battle between
the two champions*

THE HOUND OF CULAIN

or

The Child of Promise

*Retold for Story-Teller's House
from*

STANDISH O'GRADY

By

EILEEN PAGE

ILLUSTRATED BY

Drawings by
LAWRENCE WOOD



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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	The Child of Promise <i>A great feast and a prophecy.</i>	7
I	The Run-Away <i>Setanta dreams of Emain Macha—a marvelous stroke and a Mother's blessing—Setanta seeks a kingdom.</i>	10
II	The Boys of Ulster <i>The unknown stranger displays his prowess—he proclaims his identity—a happy meeting.</i>	16
III	Culain, the Mighty Smith <i>The Red Knights dine with Culain—Setanta follows in the dark—a fierce watchdog.</i>	21
IV	How Setanta Was Called Cuculain <i>Culain's rage at the death of his dog—the Red Knights prepare for battle with the gloomy smiths—Setanta halts the combat.</i>	26
V	The Sacred Chariot and the Enchanted Horses <i>Cuculain captures the enchanted horses—the steeds eat barley from the hands of their new master.</i>	32
VI	The Knighting of Cuculain <i>Cuculain hears a prophecy—he finds weapons worthy of a knight.</i>	39

- VII The Attack on the Dun of the Sons of
Nectan 44
*Cuculain journeys far to a great mountain—
he slays the sons of Nectan—a fire.*
- VIII The Hunt 51
*The enchanted deer and the wild geese from
the realms beneath the sea.*
- IX His Triumphs Over the Hosts of Meave 54
*The Champion Cuculain puts a mighty
army to rout.*
- X The Hour of Fate 58
*A sinister magic—Cuculain comes forth to
do battle—the death of Cuculain.*

PROLOGUE

THE CHILD OF PROMISE

GREAT men were the knights of the Red Branch of Ulster. They were called the children of Rury and it was said they had been born of the gods and the giants. At the noise of them running to battle all Ireland shook. Their warsteeds drank rivers dry, and the roar of their chariots reverberated from the canopy of heaven. Emain Macha was their great hall. Its length was a mile and nine furlongs and trees such as the earth nourished upheld the massive roof.

This night the great-hearted men of the Red Branch were met together there. At one end of the vast hall, upon a raised seat, sat their young king, Concoibar, slender, handsome, and upright. Far away at the other end of the hall, on a like dias, sat the Champion Fergus. A vast murmur rose from the assembly. Innumerable candles, tall as spears, illuminated the scene. The eyes of the heroes sparkled, and their yellow hair shone in the light. White and scarlet glowed the banqueting attire and the gold and silver brooches and the shining drinking vessels flashed and glittered.

It was a night when the knights of the Red Branch seemed possessed with the glory of war. They sang the battle-song so that the building quaked and rocked and there was the clanging of falling shields. When the echoes of the sound died, there arose somewhere out in the night the clear chorus of high voices singing once more the war chant of Ulster. The knights of the Red Branch were silent, listening. They knew that the song came from the boys and tender youths that belonged to the line of Rury. From the halls where they slept they responded to their fathers. The trees of Ulster shed their early leaves at that shout, and birds fell dead from the branches.

It was in the midst of this stir of glory, that the High Druid of Ulster, spoke his prophecy. And this he said—what had been said before to the knights of the Red Branch—that a child of promise was destined to come to Emain Macha and through this child fame would be brought to Ulster.

Then Concobar, the king, spoke:

“The coming of the child of promise has ever been held before the Red Branch in prophecy. I command you, as the highest of the Druids of Ulster, to divine for us when the coming of the child shall be.”

Then the High Druid put on his divining apparel and took his divining instruments in his hands and made his symbols of power upon the air. He who

had long interpreted strange dreams and omens, and the notes of wrens and ravens gazed with wide eyes full of wonder and amazement. He sang this lay:

"He is coming. He draweth nigh.

The child of many prophecies

The mainstay of Emain Macha

*The star that is to shine forever upon the
forehead of the Gael."*

So it was that the High Druid stood with his long white hands raised to the sky, crying his prophecy, and when he had made an end of speaking there was a great silence in the hall.

CHAPTER I

THE RUN-AWAY

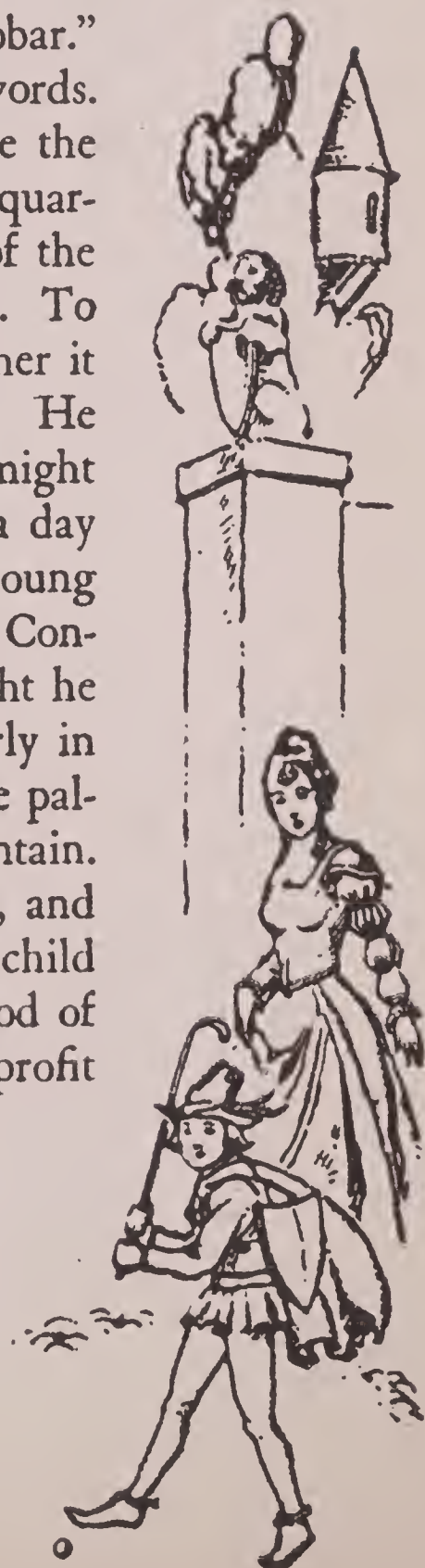
SOME distance from the great hall of Emain Macha where king Concobar walked in glory, another of his line was born. This child was the nephew of the king and was named Setanta. The little boy was raised with the song of the men of Rury ringing in his ears, their famous marches and battles and single combats and who of the Red Branch were worthy and lived and died well and who not. Cradled in strong arms, he listened to the words of the men of war who sat and talked around the blazing logs in the hall. More than all else he delighted to hear about the Champion Fergus. He grew into a lovely child, very fair and pure, yellow-haired and gentle in his bearing. He was grave beyond his years and from the time of his birth men cried: "He will do many feats in his time, little Setanta, and the last will resemble the first."

When he was three years old the boy heard the baying of the hunting dogs. He ran after their prey and with one stone he slayed it. The captains of the guard gave him a sheaf of toy javelins and taught him how to cast and made for him a sword and a

painted shield. He played beside the waves of the sea-shore and drove his ball along the hard sand. At nights he was allowed to sit with the champions in the great hall, listening to the bards who sang of the Red Branch heroes who lived at Emain Macha.

Upon his seventh birthday early in the morning he ran to his mother and cried, "Mother, send me now to Emain Macha, to my uncle, King Concobar."

His mother grew pale when she heard his words. She took him away from the great hall where the champions sat and kept him in the women's quarter of the palace. But the boy still dreamed of the hall where the knights of the Red Branch dwelt. To him it was a fairy city and he knew not whether it lay in heaven or on earth or beyond the sea. He listened for words of Emain Macha that he might learn where it was. And at last there came a day when his mother spoke carelessly and the young Setanta knew that the road to the hall of King Concobar went past a certain mountain. That night he dreamed of Emain Macha and he rose up early in the morning and climbed up to the roof of the palace. There he stood gazing long upon the mountain. The next night he dreamed again of the hall, and the third night he heard voices saying: "This child Setanta is some changeling and not of the blood of Rury. He will buy cattle and sell them for profit instead of going forth to battle."



Through the night the bright stars glowed in heaven, and the red fires burned upon earth, and these dimmed and went out, and those paled around the paling moon, and the sacred morning lightened the east.

When the sun rose his light was reflected only in the innumerable drops of glistening dew, with which the immense plain was begemmed, and a happy silence reigned save only for the songs of birds in the early morn, and the cries of pastoral men who kept watch over their roaming herds; and from the plain a thin, soft, fairy mist went up.

Setanta awoke filled with impatience to disprove these words he had heard in his dream. He took his toy weapons and put on his best clothes.

"And why do you wear this holiday attire?" laughed his mother.

"Because I shall see great people," he answered.

She kissed him, thinking that he lived in a world of dreams.

Then Setanta put his ball upon the ground and took his hurle shod in red bronze.

"Mother," he cried, "watch this stroke."

The ball crossed the great lawn before it touched the earth and bounded shining above the trees. Truly it was a marvelous stroke for one so young. Before he went for the ball, the boy stood still, saying, "Give me your blessing, dear mother."



He climbed to the hill's brow and looked westward

"Win victory and blessing for ever, O Setanta," she answered lovingly, "truly you are an expert hurler."

Setanta smiled at her, and then turned to run swiftly over the lawn to find the hidden ball.

After awhile the mother looked up to see if the boy had returned. "Setanta, Setanta," she called, but there was no answer. She bade her women go and fetch him, but they called and searched in vain. The whole household was summoned, but their shouts were echoed by silence and the watching and mocking trees rustled and a sound like low laughter whispered in the leaves. Setanta was far away.

The boy ran toward the mountain and the great road which he knew led the way to Emain Macha. In his left hand was his sheaf of toy javelins; in his right the hurle; his little shield was strapped upon his back. All day he sped along the highway. In the evening he came to the mountain. He gathered a bed of dried moss and lay down to sleep. He felt neither cold nor hunger. Awakened by the loud singing of birds, Setanta started from his mossy couch. Light of heart he started up the side of the mountain toward the high peaks. He climbed to the hill's brow and looked westward and saw far away the white shining roofs of a marvellous city. He trembled and rejoiced. He stood a long time there, gazing at Emain Macha. He went slowly down the mountainside.

Still following the great road, Setanta walked toward Emain Macha. As he neared the hall of the Red Branch knights, his footsteps dragged. He was filled with awe. He knew that he travelled toward the greatest men of Ulster.

But as he came to the grounds of the royal palace, he heard the cheerful voices of many young boys. He hurried forward. His heart yearned for the companionship of these other children of the line of Rury. He longed to cry out to them: "I am little Setanta and my uncle is the king. Look, I would be your friend and playfellow." Hesitantly he drew nearer, watching the boys line up for their hurling match. He hoped that someone would call to him and welcome him, but none called or welcomed. A few looked at him, but with looks of cold surprise, as though they said: "Who is this stranger boy and what is he doing here?"

Setanta's heart grew heavy. How often he had dreamed of his first meeting with the young boys who lived at his uncle's hall. He had thought that he would be welcomed and made much of because he was the nephew of the great Concobar and on account of his skill in hurling. But no one noticed him. No one kissed him and bade him welcome or took him by the right hand and led him among the others. No one seemed glad of his coming. He wept bitterly.

CHAPTER II

THE BOYS OF ULSTER

AND now the hurling match was on. Suddenly the ball bounded into a clear space not far from Setanta. Setanta, carried away with excitement, forgot that he had no part in the game. He cast his javelins to the ground, flung his shield on the grass and started in pursuit of the bounding ball. He outran all the others and took possession of it. Deftly he used his hurle, so that the ball eluded every opponent who sought to check it. Finally with a clear loud stroke he sent it straight through the middle of the goal. A shout of admiration greeted his skillful shot. Then the boys gathered around him. Some said, "You are a stranger here but you are very expert in the use of the hurle. Tell us how you learned to play so well?" Others cried, "Who are you?"

And this was what Setanta had longed to have them ask. Now they would know that he was one of them. Now they would rejoice to have him here.

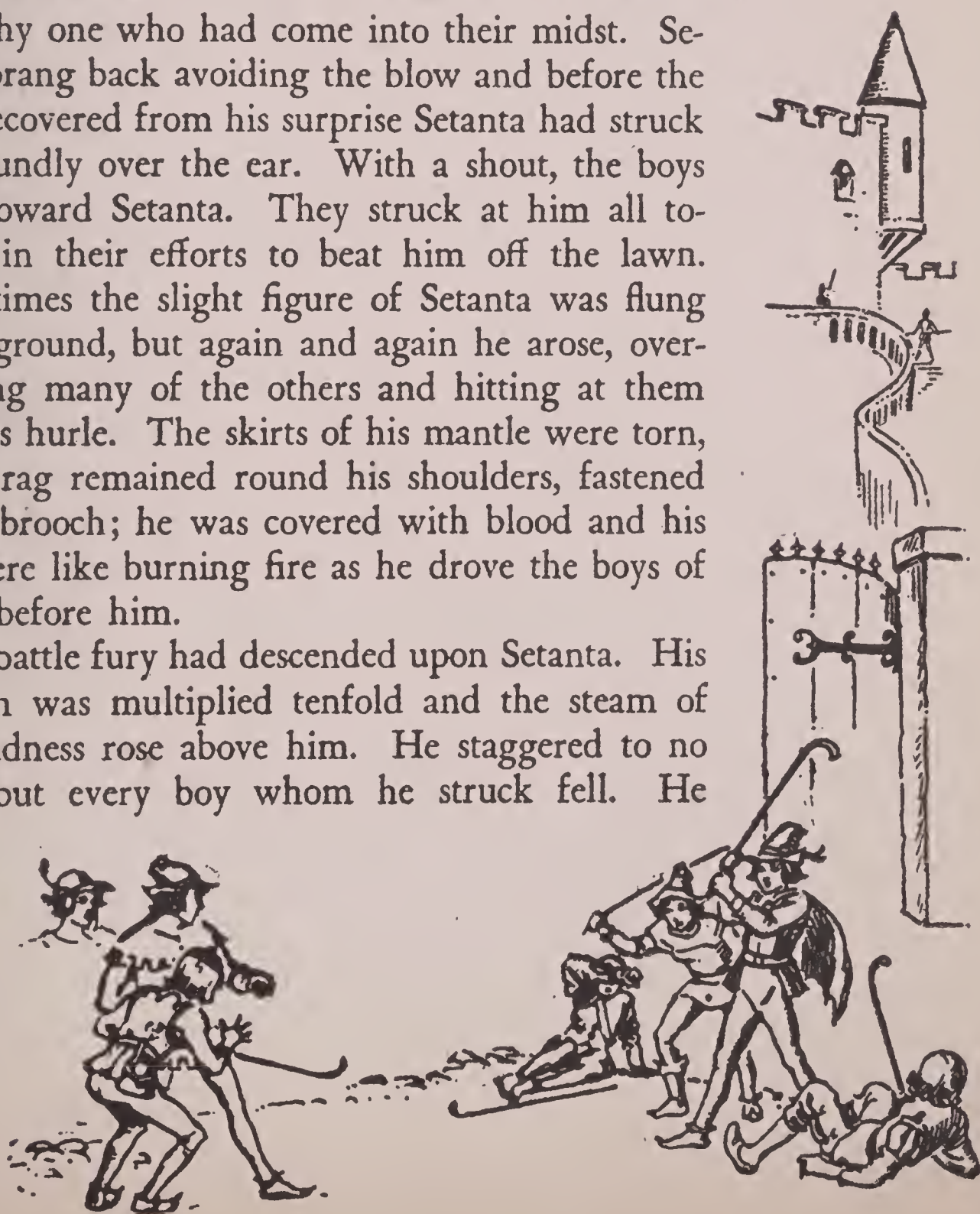
"I am Setanta, the nephew of King Concoibar," he cried joyously.

But instead of rejoicing, there was silence. Then

the captain of the boys and the biggest and strongest of all of them shouted: "The king's nephew—nay—you are a churl and a liar to boot. Run—run far—with wings on your heels to aid you, or I shall beat you off the lawn."

Setanta, filled with bewilderment and fury and a fierce aching, stood like a still figure carved out of white marble. Then the captain of the boys mistook his pallor for fear and raised his hurle to strike this unworthy one who had come into their midst. Setanta sprang back avoiding the blow and before the other recovered from his surprise Setanta had struck him soundly over the ear. With a shout, the boys raced toward Setanta. They struck at him all together in their efforts to beat him off the lawn. Many times the slight figure of Setanta was flung to the ground, but again and again he arose, overthrowing many of the others and hitting at them with his hurle. The skirts of his mantle were torn, only a rag remained round his shoulders, fastened by the brooch; he was covered with blood and his eyes were like burning fire as he drove the boys of Ulster before him.

The battle fury had descended upon Setanta. His strength was multiplied tenfold and the steam of war-madness rose above him. He staggered to no blow, but every boy whom he struck fell. He



charged this way and that. A strange tumult arose. The war-steeds of the men of the Red Branch neighed loudly in their stables and there was a clanging of brass and the roar of shields and the singing sound of swords. Then Setanta shouted to the boys who attacked him: "I will not stop this fight until you have withdrawn or until I lie without life on this lawn as a monument of the hospitality of the Red Branch."

The boys of Ulster hesitated, half ashamed at the words of the stranger. Then one boy stood out from the rest. He was freckled-faced and his hair was flaming red.

"You shall have a comrade in the battle henceforth," he said. "Oh brave stranger, a prophetess once told me that my life-long friend would be found standing against the walls of Emain Macha, at bay, with the blood and soil of battle upon him and alone challenging a multitude. She told me that this boy and I would be life-friends and that no man has ever had a friend like him or will till the end of time. I am called Laeg and from this day forward I am your man."

At this word of kindness, Setanta hid his head and hot tears burned in his eyes. But he heard the mockery of the others, and once more he drove the boys off. He chased them far over the green lawn. As he followed the retreating ones, he came to a part

of the grounds where two men sat at a chess table. Running so swiftly he could not stop, Setanta sprang lightly over the players. A hand reached forth and stopped his flight.

Setanta stood, panting with exhaustion, looking into the kindly eyes of the King himself.

"Why are you so angry—why do you hurt my boys?" said the King gravely.

It was a long time before Setanta was calm enough to speak. He answered quietly:

"Because they have not treated me with the respect due to a stranger."

"Who are you?" said the King.

"I am Setanta, the son of your sister, and it is not before my uncle's palace that I should be so basely dishonoured."

Concobar smiled for he was well pleased with the appearance and behaviour of the boy. Then the other chess-player caught the child up in his arms and kissed him, saying: "Do you know me, little Setanta?"

"I think you must be the great champion, Fergus, himself," Setanta cried with joy in his voice. Had he not always longed to see this great hero?

"Ah—I shall be his tutor, Oh king," cried Fergus. "Will you have me, Setanta?"

The boy's eyes glowed. This was the welcome of which he had dreamed for so long.

And soon Setanta became one of the boys. King Concobar was not only captain of the Red Branch and ruler of Ulster but he was also head of a great school. Setanta became the captain of the school and Laeg, his comrade, began the long friendship with the King's nephew during the months that followed. Together they learned the strange studies that Concobar ordered for his pupils: to hurl spears at a mark; to train war-horses and guide war-chariots; to defend themselves with sword and shield; to cast the hand-stone of the warrior; to run and leap and swim; to rear tents of turf and roof them with rushes; to play at chess, to drink and be merry; to be kind to the feeble and to do all that brave men do in thought and action during war and peace. Again Setanta heard of his forefathers and the line of Rury. And he knew the names of the knights of the Red Branch and the names of the boys of Ulster whose sires were these knights.

And often when the candles were snuffed out and darkness filled the dormitories, Setanta whispered to his faithful friend Laeg, of the days when they too would be knights of the Red Branch and fighters for Concobar on a glorious field of battle.

CHAPTER III

CULAIN THE MIGHTY SMITH

ONE morning a man came to Emain Macha. He was grim and swarthy, with great hands and arms. He came before Concobar and spoke: "My master, Culain, the high smith of Ulster, bids you to supper this night, O Concobar; and he invites you to bring with you a selection of your knights, choosing those who are not great eaters, and drinkers and you shall all have a fair welcome, a goodly supper, and a quantity of drink." That speech caused great mirth among the men of the Red Branch. But Concobar did not smile. He accepted the invitation courteously and the messenger went his way.

Now this same Culain was a mighty craftsman in those days. It was he who used to make weapons, armour, and chariots for the men of Ulster and there was never in Ireland a better smith than he. In his huge and smoky smithy the ringing of hammers and the husky roar of the bellows seldom ceased. He lived on a barren moor beyond the village and the lonely herdsmen and shepherds fled from the red glare of his furnaces in terror.

That afternoon Concobar chose certain of his knights and set forth for the home of Culain, the mighty smith. As they crossed the lawn, the king saw young Setanta playing with his comrades. Well beloved was the child at Emain Macha. He was now ten years old, straight and well-made, with sinews as hard as tempered steel. When he saw the king looking at him, he blushed for in spite of his great strength and skill, he was modest and shy.

"Setanta," Concobar said smiling, "Culain, the mighty smith has invited us to a feast. If it would please you, you may come too."

"It is pleasing indeed," replied the boy, for he had long desired to see the great forger, "but I cannot leave the boys in the midst of our contest. As soon as it is over I will follow quickly. I will not lose my way upon the moor, for the road is well trodden and will guide me."

Concobar gave him permission and Setanta hastened back to his playmates.

As they went their way to the smith's, the King cautioned his knights against saying or doing anything that might make Culain angry, or incite them to any wrath.

"Culain and his many smiths are a strange people and a great and formidable people," Concobar warned them.

The Red Branch did not like these words. They

thought that under the measureless canopy of the sky there were no people great or formidable but themselves.

* * * *

When Culain saw far away the tall figures of the Red Branch and the flashing of their weapons and armor, he cried out to his people to stop working and to make ready to receive Concobar. He and his journeymen and apprentices washed the smoke and sweat of their labour away, peering into the dark waters of enormous tubs to see how they looked in their glorious array. And the house thralls prepared the supper, roasting and boiling and stewing. A party of Culain's men went forth to greet the guests, but Culain stood in the great doorway awaiting them. He stood with one knee crooked, leaning upon a long ash-handled sledge with a head of glittering bronze. It was dusk when Concobar reached the host's side.

"Are you all here who are to come?" said the smith as they approached.

"Here we all are," said the men of the Red Branch gayly, not thinking of the following Setanta.

As they went inside, Culain bade his servants raise the drawbridge and after that he unchained his one dog to guard the household while the feast was going on. The dog was of great size and fierceness. He was faithful to Culain and guarded his property

vigilantly at night. He was quick of sight and hearing and only slept in the daytime. When Culain unloosened him, he ran around the moat baying fearfully and then stood stiffly at the edge of it, watching and listening and growling when he heard some noise far away.

In the meantime the smith went inside with his guests. When he had commanded his people to light the candles, he slammed the vast folding doors with his right hand and with his left he drew forth the bar and shot it in place. Certain of the younger knights of Ulster looked to Concobar for reassurance. Not one of them could have opened that great portal. But the captain of the Red Branch was listening with pleasure to the words of the rough Culain. The mighty smith swore that no generation of the children of Rury had put the weapons that Culain had forged to such good use as the men of Concobar's host. Concobar then praised the smith and his workers for their work, mentioning the great shield that belonged to himself, that which was called Ocean because it roared when the brave captain of the Red Branch was in danger. And greatly pleased was the smith, Culain, as he heard these words.

The night wore on and the feasting and drinking reached its height. Now there were toasts for heroes of the past and for those who were in the room. At last Concobar spoke, saying: "Let there be toasts

for the heroes who are to come after us, as well as for those who have gone before. A toast to the boys of my school and especially for their captain, my nephew Setanta."

"Is he then a boy of promise, O Concobar?" said the smith, "for if he is I am truly rejoiced to know it."

"He is all that I say," said the King proudly. "And of that you yourself shall be judge tonight. He is coming soon. At any moment I expect to hear the loud clamor of his hurle upon the doors, for he will leap at one bound your moat and your rampart."

Culain, the smith, started from his high seat when he heard these words. His brows were drawn together with rage: "If the boy comes now," he said, "before I can chain my watchdog, your Setanta will be torn into small pieces."

Even as the smith's words startled his listeners, a long baying of a dog sounded terribly in the hollow night, and the face of every hero in the vast chamber suddenly blanched.

CHAPTER IV

HOW SETANTA WAS CALLED CU-CULAIN

OUTSIDE was heard a noise of trampling feet and short furious yells and gaspings. There was a sudden dull sound at which the earth seemed to shake, mingled with the noise of breaking bones, and after that silence. Before the people in the smith's household could do more than look at each other speechless, they heard a knocking at the door. Some of the smith's workers shot back the bolt, and the boy Setanta stepped in out of the night. He was very pale. His scarlet mantle was in rags and trailing, and his linen tunic beneath and his white knees were red with blood which ran down his legs and over his bare feet. He bowed as he had been taught, to the man of the house and to his people. The knights of Red Branch ran to meet him, but Fergus was the first and he took the boy upon his mighty shoulder and bore him down to where King Concobar was sitting.

"Did the dog attack you?" said Culain.

"Truly he came against me," answered the boy.

"And are you hurt?" cried the smith.

"No, indeed," answered Setanta, "but I think he is."

At that moment a party of the smith's people entered bearing between them the carcass of the dog, and they showed Culain how the skull of the dog and his ribs had been broken in pieces by some mighty blow. And they said in wonder: "One of the great pillars which stands at the bridge is bent awry and the clean bronze is stained with blood. It was at the foot of that pillar we found the dog."

As Culain looked at his dog, there was a great silence in the chamber. The eyes of the smith were darkly brooding and his voice was charged with wrath and sorrow when he spoke.

"O Concoibar," he said, "and you, the rest of the children of Rury. You are my guests tonight, wherefore it is not lawful that I should take vengeance upon you for the killing of my brave and faithful hound, who was a better keeper of my treasures than a company of hired warriors. Truly there was not his equal as a watcher and warder in the world. Therefore I must be paid some forfeit. Consult together concerning its amount and let it be great for by Orchil and all the gods who rule beneath the earth, I will not accept a small one."

Concoibar answered hotly: "You shall not get from me nor from the men of Ulster any forfeit great or small. My nephew slew the beast in fair fight, defending his own life. But I will say something else, proud smith. Had the wolf slain my

nephew not one of you would have left this hall alive, and of your famous city I would have made a smoking heap."

The Red Branch fiercely applauded this speech. Then the smiths armed themselves with their hammers and tongs and fire-poles and great bars of unwrought brass. Culain the mighty seized an anvil with which to lay waste the ranks of Concobar's men. The knights of Ulster on their side ran to the walls and plucked down their spears from the pegs, and they raised their shields and balanced their long spears, and swords flashed and screeched as they rushed forth. The vast chamber glittered with shaking bronze and shone with the eyeballs of angry men. There were shouts of defiance and quick fierce words of command. The Red Branch battled from one side of the chamber and the smiths from the other. The vast and high dome re-echoed with the terrible cries of the men of Ulster and the roar of the children of the gloomy Orchil who ruled beneath the ground was heard. Far away the magic shield, Ocean, that hung at Emain Macha moaned, for the peril of death and of shortness of life were around Concobar in that hour. So men stood ready to battle and it was plain that the smiths would have made a bloody end of the Red Branch had the battle gone forward. But before the first missile was hurled on either side, the boy Setanta sprang into the midst of the enraged



*The boy Setanta sprang into the midst of the
enraged men*

men and cried aloud with a clear high voice that rang distinctly above the tumult:

“Restrain your men, great Culain, and you O men of Ulster do not shoot. I myself will pay the forfeit for the brave and faithful hound. I will myself take the dog’s place and nightly guard your property, sleepless as he was, and I will continue to do so till a hound as trusty and valiant as the hound I slew is found to take my place and relieve me of the duty. Truly I did not slay your hound to show my superior strength, but only in the defense of my own life. Three times he leaped upon me with white fangs bared and eyes red with murder and three times I cast him off, but when the fourth time he rushed upon me like a storm, I took him by the throat and by his legs and flung him against one of the pillars hoping to stun him. Truly, great Culain, it was not my intention to kill him and I am sorry that he is dead, seeing that he was so faithful and so brave in guarding your castle.”

When Culain the mighty heard the words of the fair youth his fierce brows relaxed. At first he looked at the lad with pity—but gradually the boy’s bravery aroused his admiration.

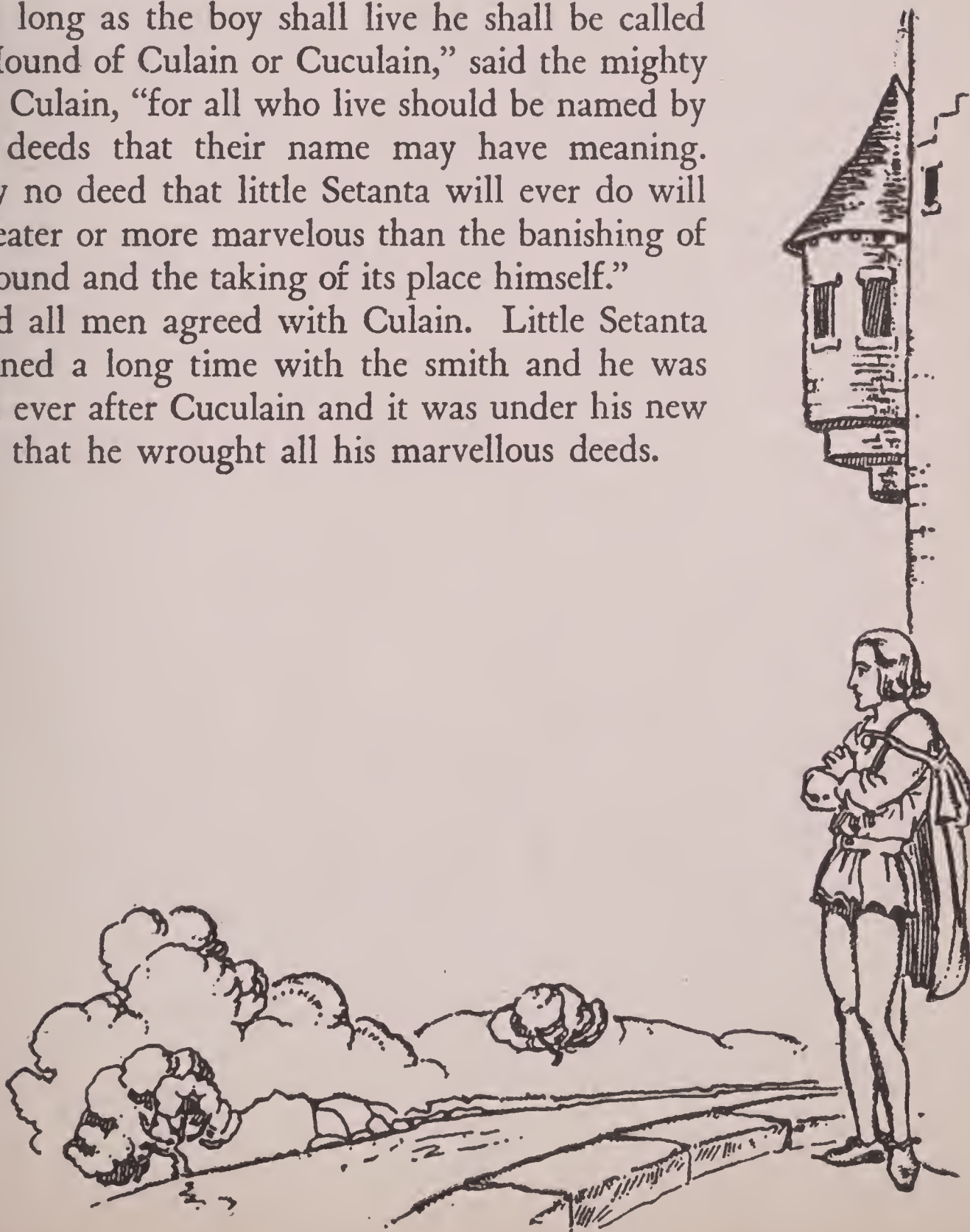
“Your proposal is pleasing to me,” he said, “and I will accept it.”

And when Concobar saw the smith throw his mighty anvil into the dark end of the chamber, he

too dropped his weapons. He knew that he could trust the boy with Culain for the rough man was ever tender with those who were sturdy and noble, and the captain of the Red Branch rejoiced because his men were safe. Well he knew that the huge gloomy smiths might have killed all the men of Ulster in their terrible rage.

"As long as the boy shall live he shall be called the Hound of Culain or Cuculain," said the mighty smith Culain, "for all who live should be named by their deeds that their name may have meaning. Surely no deed that little Setanta will ever do will be greater or more marvelous than the banishing of my hound and the taking of its place himself."

And all men agreed with Culain. Little Setanta remained a long time with the smith and he was called ever after Cuculain and it was under his new name that he wrought all his marvellous deeds.



CHAPTER V

THE SACRED CHARIOT AND THE ENCHANTED HORSES

CULAIN the mighty found at last another hound to guard his treasures and young Cuculain went back to live with the men of the Red Branch. The days passed happily. The little Se-tanta was forgotten. Instead a fair youth named Cuculain ran merrily with the boys of Ulster. If at one time Concobar had dreamed that this boy who had come into their midst might be the child of promise that had been prophesied, he forgot his dream. For Cuculain, though he far surpassed the other lads, seemed like one of them as he shot spears and cast battle-stones and hurled on the great lawn. The prophecies had been very great. Concobar looked for a child that resembled the gods or the giants. But so great was the love that Cuculain called forth that Concobar was not disappointed that his nephew was not the chosen one.

One day the king called Cuculain to him, saying: "I have a duty for you, lad. A part of my kingly office demands that I take care of the chariot of Macha and for this task I may choose an assistant

to aid me in its fulfillment. Illan the Fair was my last helper. It is time to choose another. The task is yours if it pleases you."

Cuculain was pleased that this honor had come to him. Then Concobar said:

"Go and fill this silver jar with oil and bring with you a towel of fawn-skin."

Cuculain obeyed, and together they went to the chariot-house. They entered the vast hollow room that held only the chariot. It was of great size and beauty. The bronze seemed to burn it was so bright. By its side were two horse-stalls with racks and mangers of gold bronze and yellow brass. The floor was paved with cut marble, the walls lined with smooth boards of ash. Nine lamps were in the room and burned with a high flame.

"It will be your duty to feed the lamps," said Concobar, "go now to the chamber where the grain is kept and clear out the mangers to the last grain and empty the stale barley and afterwards fill them with the fresh barley you will bring here."

Cuculain obeyed. But when he returned and saw his uncle polishing the head-gear of the horses and the long shining reins of interwoven brass, he cried in bewilderment as he watched him: "Where are the horses, my Uncle Concobar?"

"That I cannot rightly tell," answered the King.

"But what are these horses?" said the boy. "What

are they called? What are they like and why do I fill their racks and mangers with good barley if they are not here to eat it?"

"They are enchanted horses," said Concobar dreamily, "they are called Liath Macha and Black Shanglan. They have not been seen in Erin for three hundred years. It is said that they are to return some day for the promised one that has been prophesied for us. They will bear him to battle."

"Will the promised one be a great and stern hero?" asked the boy.

"Nay, it is said that he will be gentle and not know his own greatness. His nearest comrades will not know it and there will be more of love in his heart than war."

Cuculain was excited at these words, and when he went back to the hall he told Laeg what Concobar had said.

* * * *

One night soon after Cuculain stood in the garden looking at the stars. Suddenly he heard a voice say to him: "Tonight, O Cuculain, you shall go forth and take captive the enchanted horses, Liath Macha and Black Shanglan. Power will be given to you and you may go forth boldly."

Cuculain wondered at this happening. He shivered with excitement, and when he went into the supper hall he walked as if he were in a dream.

"Your eyes are very bright," said Laeg anxiously.

"They will be brighter ere the day comes," Cuculain replied.

Laeg shrugged his shoulders for he did not understand his friend's words. He turned his attention to the juggler who had entered the hall to perform during the dinner hour.

"That is an expert juggler," said Laeg. "How he tosses the bright balls!"

"I wonder if he could toss the stars as well," laughed Cuculain.

"You are strange and wild tonight," said Laeg.

"I will be stranger and wilder ere the morrow," cried Cuculain.

With these words Cuculain sprang to his feet. Laeg caught hold of his mantle, but the piece came away in his hand. Cuculain was off before they knew it.

"Where are you going, lad?" the King cried.

"To seek my horses," they heard Cuculain reply.

"They are stabled since the setting of the sun," said the chief groom.

"Nay—they are never stabled," answered the boy.

"They are in the hills and valleys of Erin."

Only Concobar understood these words. His eyes burned and he smiled as he said:

"Great deeds will be done in Erin this night."

Then started Cuculain on his strange errand. He

crossed the plains and the moors and the open country. On his way he stopped at the smithy of Culain the mighty. Culain's new hound cowered low when he saw him. The boy sprang over moat and rampart at one bound and rushed into the presence of the great smith.

"This is a strange way to enter a man's house," said Culain.

"It is," answered Cuculain, "but even stranger things are to happen this night. I want bridles that will hold the Liath Macha and Black Shanglan. Can your smiths make them?"

"Fire all the furnaces," cried Culain. "Handle your tools; show your might. Work now, men, for your lives. Truly if Cuculain has not the bridles your dead will be more numerous than your living. The wild horses will trample us all."

Faster than light they worked. Culain himself aided the lesser smiths. At last Cuculain had the bridles. Once more he went forth. He went southwest to the Grey Lake. The moon shone and the lake glowed like silver. Out of the waters arose a slow, sweet, fairy music, most heart-piercing, causing tears through its beauty.

In the pale light, Cuculain saw a great horse feeding by the water. The horse raised his head and neighed when he heard footsteps on the hill. He came toward Cuculain and the boy came toward

him. Cuculain had one bridle knotted around his waist and the other in his teeth. He leaped upon the steed and caught him by the forelock and his mouth. The horse reared mightily, but Cuculain held him and dragged his head down to the ground. The grey steed grew greater and more terrible. So did Cuculain.

"You have met your master, O Liath Macha, this night," he cried. "Surely I will not lose you. Ascend into the heavens or descend into the realm that Orchil rules, yet even so you will not shake me away."

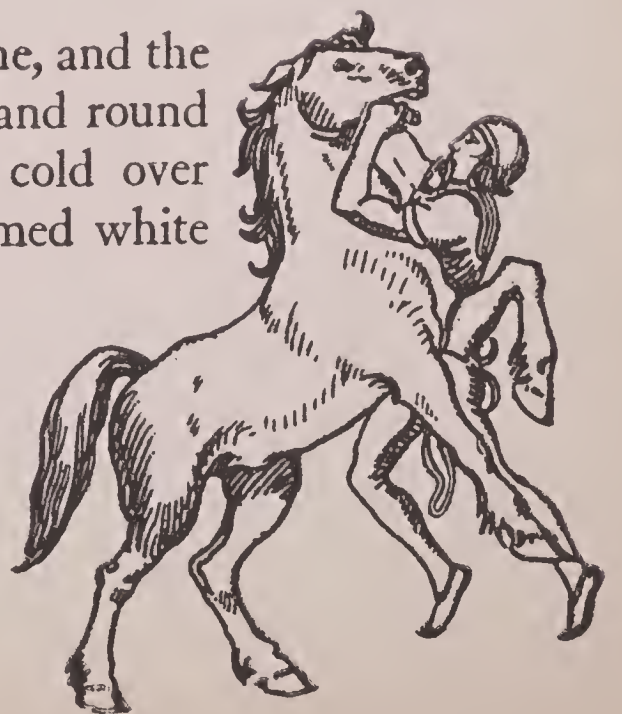
Ireland quaked from the centre to the sea. They reeled together, steed and hero.

"Make the circuit of all Ireland, Liath Macha, and I shall be on your neck still," cried Cuculain as he clung to him with all his strength.

The horse went in reeling circles round Ireland. Then Liath Macha went a second time round Ireland. The sea retreated from the shore and stood in heaps. Cuculain sprang upon his back. A third time the horse went round Ireland, bounding from peak to peak. And then it came to a stand.

"I think you are tamed, O Liath Macha," said Cuculain. "Go on now to the Dark Valley."

So through the wilderness they rode alone, and the darkness increased and behind them full and round rose the white moon. The wind blew cold over those waste solitudes and the stones gleamed white



and fierce like the fangs of wolves bared and staring in the ghastly moonshine.

They came to the Dark Valley. There was night there always. As the moon set, Cuculain saw faces that moved amongst the trees mocking him, and horrid things, formless and cold, estrays out of the fold of hell, wandering blots of the everlasting darkness, and there was laughter in the hollow chambers of the forest. They rode past the apparitions. There was a roaring of unseen rivers in the darkness, of black cataracts rushing down the steep sides of the Valley. The Liath Macha neighed loudly. A horse neighed joyfully in response. There was a noise of iron doors rushing open somewhere and a four-footed thunderous trampling on the hollow-sounding earth. A steed came to the Liath Macha. Cuculain felt for his head in the dark and bitted and bridled him ere he was aware of what had happened. The horse reared and struggled.

"Struggle not, Black Shanglan," said Cuculain, "I have tamed you."

The horse ceased to struggle.

Then rode Cuculain to Emain Macha with the two horses like lords of Day and Night, for Liath Macha was a silvery grey and Black Shanglan was as dark as night. The doors of the chariot-house flew open to receive them, and that night the enchanted steeds ate barley from the hands of their new master.

CHAPTER VI

THE KNIGHTING OF CUCULAIN

ONE night when the stars shone brightly, Cuculain passed by the astrological tower where Cathvah stood reading the wisdom of the stars. And Cuculain heard Cathvah say to his students that whoever should be knighted by Concohar on the next day would be famous to the world's end. Cuculain left the tower thoughtfully.

Later that night a fearful storm rocked all Ireland. There were mighty tramlings and cries and a four-footed thunder of giant hoofs. Buildings shook and a brazen clangour sounded under the bright stars. The chiefs of the Red Branch sat in the great hall, wakeful and brooding. Such a druidic storm as this carried portents of some great wonder.

Suddenly Cuculain came into the hall and approached the high seat where Concohar sat with those high in his counsel.

"If it is pleasing to you, my Uncle," he said, "I would be knighted on the morrow, for I am now of due age and owing to the instructions of my tutor, the Champion Fergus, I am able to play a man's part among the knights of the Red Branch."



"Have you heard what Cathvah has predicted concerning the youth who is knighted on the morrow?" said the King.

"Yes," answered Cuculain, "that he will be famous to the world's end."

"That is not all," said Concobar sternly, "that he will be short-lived and unhappy as well."

"That does not alter my wish, though I may not be him of whom Cathvah has this night prophecied," said Cuculain.

Concobar yielded to the boy's request, though his heart was sad at the thought of any unhappiness coming to Cuculain. But his hopes were high. What might not Cuculain do? Had he not brought the Enchanted horses back to the stable of Macha? In the dead of night Concobar took a candle and went to the boy's dormitory. He saw Cuculain and Laeg, his comrade, sleeping near one another. Their faces were turned toward each other. Cuculain's face was as serene as his friend's. The king shivered in dread. Sorrow would come to the features of this lad who slept so dreamlessly in peace.

On the morrow there was a great hosting of the Red Branch on the plain of the Assemblies. Chariots and war-horses ringed the plain. All the horses' heads were turned toward the centre where Concobar and the chiefs of the Red Branch stood. The plain flashed with gold, bronze, and steel and glowed with

the bright mantles of the heroes, crimson and scarlet, blue, green, or purple. The huge brooches on their breasts of gold and silver and of gold-like bronze were like resplendent wheels. These were the heroes and demigods of the heroic age of Erin, champions who feared nothing beneath the sun, mightiest among the mighty, huge, proud and unconquerable. Concobar had no crown. A plain circle of beaten gold girt his broad temples. His stature and noble bearing, his slowly-turning, steady-gazing eyes and the majesty of his bearded countenance marked him the captain of the Red Branch.

Cuculain came forth from the palace. He wore that day a short mantle of pale-red silk bordered with white thread and fastened on the breast with a small silver brooch. His tunic of fine linen was girt with a leathern belt stained to the color of a wild-briar rose. His hair fell in auburn locks. As to his eyes, no two could agree to their color, for some said they were blue, some grey and there were those who thought they were blacker than the blackest night that was ever known. He stood as straight and pliant as a young fir tree. So he came to the assembly in the glory of youth and beauty and strength, yet proud in his humility and glittering like the morning star. The kings held their breath when he drew near.

When the rites had been performed and the due sacrifices and libations made and after Cuculain had

put his right hand into the right hand of the King and become his man, Concobar gave him a shield, two spears and a sword, weapons of great price. Cuculain struck the spears together and broke them. He clashed the sword on the shield and it broke into small pieces while the shield was bent and torn.

"These are not worthy weapons, my King," said Cuculain, "with which to fight for you."

Twice Concobar sent for stronger arms and Cuculain shattered them, and the king was exultant when he beheld the amazing strength and the waywardness of the boy. Finally he beckoned to one of his knights who hastened away and returned bearing Concobar's own shield and spears and sword. And these Cuculain could not break.

"These are good arms," cried the young knight.

"Choose now the charioteer who will drive the war-horses and chariot that I shall give you," said Concobar.

And the boys went through many tests, hoping that Cuculain would choose the strongest among them. Near-by stood Laeg with a pale face. Cuculain laughed and said, "Ah, Laeg, did you think I would choose other than you to drive me?"

"Ah yes, there was that fear upon me," sighed Laeg in answer.

After that Laeg stood by Cuculain's side and held his peace, but his face shone with joy and pride.

Then there were led forward by two strong knights a pair of great and spirited horses and a splendid war-car. Cuculain sprang into the car and stamped from side to side until the axle broke and the car fell to pieces.

“It is not a worthy chariot,” said the lad.

Others were brought forward, and Cuculain broke in succession nine war chariots, the greatest and strongest in Emain. When he broke the ninth, a loud neighing was heard in the stables of Macha. Then at a signal from Concobar, Laeg and Cuculain leaped forward to the stables where the Sacred Chariot and the Enchanted Horses were kept. And soon men heard the thundering of the great war-car and the wild neighing of the immortal steeds as they broke from the dark stable into the clear light of day.

They were seen rushing forth from the city into the open, the great car green and gold with many twinkling wheels, the charioteer leaning backwards and sideways as he laboured to restrain the fury of the grey steed and the black one. And standing erect with brandishing spears was Cuculain. The wild people of the glens and the demons of the air roared around him and the war sprites of Gael shouted after him and the men of Ulster fell down like reaped grass with their faces to the earth. They knew now that Cuculain was the child of promise who had come their way according to the Druid's prophecies.

CHAPTER VII

THE DUN OF THE SONS OF NECTAN

HAPPILY rode Laeg and Cuculain. The power and gallant action of the steeds and the clanking of the harness and chains and the ringing of the weapons of war filled them with excitement.

So all day long the chariot brayed along the stony ways or raced across the smooth plains. For where the land was tilled and enclosed, and the homesteads of men abounded, and their labours, there indeed were roads, but oftentimes they traversed wide territories where was no chariot-track and no sign-post save the distant hills. Across the Calan they rushed while the foaming spray flew high above the trampling steeds, and along the reedy shores, where, in the oak-groves, herds of many swine under their keepers, batted on the root of the wild parsnip. Between the echoing woods and the gleaming lake, in sunshine and shadow, Laeg the charioteer thundered. Out on the quiet mere, fishermen let fall their half-drawn nets and sprang to their oars at the noise of his journeying.

"What is that great firm-based mountain upon our left hand?" said Cuculain.

And Laeg said: "Men call it Slieve Modurn after a giant of old."

"Guide the horses there," said Cuculain, "it is right that those who go forth to battle against an enemy should first spy out the land. Slieve Modurn yonder commands a brave respect."

They unharnessed the horses in the green valley and leaving them to graze, climbed the mountain and stood upon the top, overlooking the great green plain that extended on the other side. Far away on the left glittered the White Cairn of Slieve Faud; far away in front the plains of Murthemney rolled green to the Ictian sea. Eastward, he saw the dark highland of Fochaine and—like a silver thread—the bright way where, from his fountains, Avon-Dia sought the sea. Out of the cloudless west the hot sun watched him. The shadows of the gigantic steeds stretched wavering down the eastern slopes. And Cuculain questioned Laeg concerning the cities of the plain and the nobles and kings who dwelt in the prosperous duns. And Cuculain said: "None of these kings and lords and chief men whom we have talked of have at any time injured my nation and there is not one whom I may take vengeance upon rightly. But I see one other splendid dun and of this no word has been mentioned though I have questioned you three times concerning it without receiving an answer, my friend."

Laeg grew pale at these words and he said, "What dun is that, master?"

"Fox that you are, right well you know which one I mean," said Cuculain hotly. "It is not a little one, but great, proud and rearing its towers as a man who has never known defeat lifts his head. Come, Laeg, answer me, what dun is this?"

"That is the dun of the sons of Nectan," Laeg answered slowly. "Take the road to any dun in the world save that one, master. The men are not alive today who at any time approach the sons of Nectan with warlike intent. Those who dwell in their dun are sorcerers and enchanters, lords of all the arts of poison and of war."

"Lead on and guide thither my horses, for I shall lay waste that dun and burn it with fire, after having slain the men who dwell there."

Laeg saw the valour that kindled the soul of Cuculain. Fearing it, he obeyed.

Once more they harnessed the horses and yoked the chariot. Southward, then, they fared swiftly through the night. When they arrived at the dun of the sons of Nectan it was twilight and the dawning of the day. Before the dun there was a green and spacious lawn in full view of the palace.

"Noble indeed is the dun," said Cuculain, "and pleasant this green grass. It is still early, for the sun is not yet risen and the people of the dun are in heavy

slumber. I would repose now for a while and rest myself before the battle that awaits me this day. Wherefore, good Laeg, let down the sides and seats of the chariot, that I may take a short sleep."

"Witless and without sense, you are," answered Laeg, "for who but an idiot would think of sweet sleep in hostile territory, much more in full view of those who look out from the dun of the sons of Nectan."

"Do as I bid," said Cuculain.

So Laeg obeyed, though his heart was heavy with misgiving, and soon Cuculain slept.

Of the people of the dun, Foil, son of Nectan, was the first to awake. With one hand he shot back the bar of his chamber, making a tremendous noise. There he stood, a black-haired fierce figure in the doorway. He looked at Laeg and Laeg looked at him in return.

"Drive the horses off the lawn," he snarled.

"Drive them off yourself," said Laeg.

"Who is this sleeping youth?" cried Foil in great anger when he heard these words.

"He is a certain mild and gentle youth of Ulster who yesterday morning assumed his arms of chivalry for the first time and has come hither to prove his valor with brave deeds."

"Many youths of his nation have come here but they have never returned," laughed Foil loudly.

"This youth will," said Laeg, "after having slain the sons of Nectan and after having sacked their dun and burned it with fire. Go back now for your weapons of war and all the instruments of sorcery and enchantment you have, for truly you are in need of them all."

The people of the dun, awakened by the sound of voices, clustered like bees on the slope of the mound. They hissed and roared and shouted words of insult as Laeg spoke. And Laeg stood still and silent with the point of his sword leaning on the ground. Very ardently he longed for his master to awake. He saw Foil disappear and knew that he had gone for his arms. At the moment Foil reappeared in the doorway of the dun, fully equipped for battle. Cuculain opened his eyes. At first he was bewildered, but when he heard the people shouting and saw his enemy descending the slopes of the dun, he started from his bed like a deer from its lair. And the people of the dun fell silent when they beheld his swift movements and the splendour of his beauty.

Then they fought, and in the first combat Cuculain could do no more than defend himself against the fierce onslaught of Foil. The second combat was like the first. But in the third round Cuculain sprang upwards and dashed his shield into the mighty Foil's face, and at the same time he brought forth a magic ball. Taking swift aim he threw it like a bolt from

a sling and struck the giant in the middle of his forehead. With a crash of ringing armor and weapons, Foil fell. And now came forth Tuatha, the second son of Nectan, and with him also Cuculain went into combat. The darts that Tuatha flung at Cuculain were dodged. Behind this young knight of Ulster, the lawn was sown thick with spears. When Tuatha had thrown his last shaft, he rushed upon Cuculain with his sword. But Cuculain lifted the broad-bladed spear that Concobar had given him and cast it at the man who rushed toward him. And the second son of Nectan fell, wounded and torn.

Then came the third son, Fenla, the son of Nectan who was called Swallow because of his swiftness. He was more at home in the water than on dry land and his challenge to Cuculain was that the battle should be fought where he could dive like a water-dog, glide like an eel, and rush like a salmon in the swift spring currents.

Marvelous and terrible was the battle between the two champions. For the spray and the froth and the flying spume of the waters rose in white clouds about them. Amid the roar of the waves ever sounded the dry clash of the meeting swords and the clang of the shields and the ringing of helmets. And Cuculain who had been well taught at the school of Concobar in sports as well as studies, could dive as well as the son of Nectan and could outlast him in the water.

At last the moment came when Fenla and Cuculain were in close combat in the water, and the sword of Cuculain slew the third and last son of Nectan:

When the people of the dun saw that, they rushed forth and fled. And Cuculain and Laeg invaded the dun and burst open the doors of the dungeons and freed the prisoners there. They gave these captives the riches of the castle, and they set the vast place on fire. The devouring flames shot heavenward, fed with pine and red yew. Upwards rolled a mighty pillar of black smoke, reddened with rushing sparks and flaming embers. And far off men saw this smoke and consulted their prophets and wizards as to what this portent might mean, for it was not a little smoke that the burning of the dun of the sons of Nectan sent forth that day.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HUNT

WHEN Laeg and Cuculain left the burning dun, they entered the groves of a vast wood.

Cuculain was pale from the battle he had just fought and his eyes blazed. He was filled with war-fury and the noontide seemed like darkness and all shapes that came his way were murky and obscure.

"See, O Laeg, what herd of monstrous deer is this wandering in the grove? Sad-colored they are and livid, with horns and hoofs of iron," said Cuculain.

"No deer of the earth are they," said Laeg. "They are the enchanted herd of the mountain Slieve Fuad. They dwell underground and have come up to earth to graze."

"Let us pursue and run down the deer," cried Cuculain merrily.

"There is fear upon me," said Laeg.

But Laeg followed Cuculain because he was always to follow Cuculain until the day of his death. There was not hunting seen like this before in Erin. Cuculain pursued in such close and desperate chase, that the herd was soon run down. They fell upon their knees with the sobbing sound of the captured.

Springing from his chariot, Cuculain made fast two of the deer, one to the front and one to the rear of the chariot, so they went riding after with a deer of the underground regions running before them and another following behind.

"What are those birds whiter than snow and more brilliant than stars?" asked Cuculain.

"They are the wild geese of the enchanted realms beneath the sea. Have nought to do with these birds, dear master."

Cuculain stood up in his chariot with his sling in his hand and he fitted into it small bolts. He did not stop until he had overthrown and laid low three score of the enchanted birds. Then Cuculain sprang from the chariot and tied the birds to the harness. The birds returned to life and Cuculain cut the cords that held them so that the birds flew beside them.

In that manner, speeding northward, Cuculain returned to Emain Macha. There he was welcomed with great reverence and glory. Bards sang of his marvelous deeds, his conquest of the men of Nectan, and the wild hunt. And Cuculain was only seventeen years old when he did these feats. The bards were to sing far greater deeds in the short years before his death, for short-lived he was to be. And poets were to sing of the love that came to him and his marriage with fair Emer, daughter of a King, and of countless other triumphs.



The birds flew singing beside him

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-25-26-27-28-29-30-31-32-33-34-35-36-37-38-39-40-41-42-43-44-45-46-47-48-49-50-51-52-53-54-55-56-57-58-59-60-61-62-63-64-65-66-67-68-69-70-71-72-73-74-75-76-77-78-79-80-81-82-83-84-85-86-87-88-89-90-91-92-93-94-95-96-97-98-99-100

CHAPTER IX

HIS TRIUMPHS OVER THE HOSTS OF MEAVE

STRANGELY it was a woman who was the greatest opponent of the mighty Cuculain. And this was Queen Meave, whom a hundred thousand spears defended and who was herself the flower of the warriors in four great provinces. She went with her warriors to the battlefields travelling in her war-car among her hosts of brave men. The day came when the hosts of the Four Provinces and the armies of Meave triumphed over the men of the Red Branch. They were defeated but undestroyed. But even as fires were built in the camp of Meave and rejoicing and feasting was carried on, the men of the Red Branch were ravaging the forests for materials to build a rampart. They firmly resolved that they would perish there, taking terrible revenges, before they would retreat from Meave's mighty host.

Above, the moon rose on the night of the second day of the month. Her beams were reflected from the burnished points of innumerable spears, the bright faces of shields, and the ornamented handles of swords, and illuminated a hundred embroidered

banners. Then a mighty din, a vast confused uproar, resounded where camped the great host of the men of Meave, the neighing of war-steeds, the lowing of herds driven away from their accustomed pastures, and the bleating of countless sheep, the scouring of the armour of warriors, the washing of chariots and the noise of files, the sound of the harp, the voices of bards and the reciters of tales, and the loud laughter of those who jested and caroused.

In the dawning of the next day, the men of Meave found that the men of Ulster had not fled, and they saw how these knights of the Red Branch had reared an immense rampart like a bended bow. They coun- ciled together as to how they would attack this stock- ade. But they were surprised to find that the Red Branch did not wait for them, but poured forth in torrents both chariots and footmen. Though dimin- ished in numbers they were proud and exultant and rushed forward as if they were certain of victory. At first the men of Conco-bar were driven and tossed ruthlessly. Like islands in the sea were the battalions of the Red Branch and like the foaming seas rushing over them were the hosts of Meave.

But in the midst of defeat came riding the Cham- pion Cuculain. His bronze hair tossing, he rushed at the side of his raging steeds, gigantic horses, neigh- ing loudly and shaking their tossing manes. And the prophets whispered: "The earth will not breed



one like to him, or second. It is the Hound of Culain who comes to save the battle for the men of Ulster. It is Cuculain, the invincible who rushes to victory."

Then Cuculain drew forth his sling and fitted into it an iron bolt, where thong and timber joined. And this was but the beginning of many bolts to be slung. Swifter than words can tell was the slinging of Cuculain. In all directions his bolts shot, and brave men fell and the hosts were confused. So he continued his slinging, and wherever he saw the Red Branch overpowered, at that point he continued to shoot his bolts until the pressure of the foe relaxed and the men of Ulster were relieved. And gradually Cuculain routed the host of Meave until the war Queen's battalions were confused and chariots and fighting men were cast in heaps and rolled over one another. A magic darkness covered all things and when it had vanished men saw Cuculain alone on the field of battle which was torn and upturned as if ploughed by giant teams. The hero stood alone and motionless. Few were the champions of the world who would have faced him at this moment. He leaped upon the chariot-pole of his great war cart and laughed in fierceness as he stood with one foot on the back of Liath Macha, the grey steed. He was not like a mortal fighter now. And his voice pealed, the voice of the Hound for which he was named.

Then sprang Queen Meave from her chariot and

fled away upon her feet and her hosts followed her. And Cuculain, still laughing his wild laughter, lifted his shield that no one could pursue her as she fled with her warriors. Again Cuculain had triumphed for the Red Branch, and his triumph against Queen Meave was the greatest of any other in his lifetime.



CHAPTER X

THE HOUR OF FATE

THE time drew near when Cuculain should die, for he was in the twenty-eighth year of his life doomed to be short-lived. And men who were prophets warned Cuculain that death would come to him by the hand of Queen Meave, for she could never forget the defeat she had suffered from him.

All those who loved the Hound of Culain urged him to go into hiding for at any time the clan of Cailitin, the six foul creatures versed in wizardry that were used by Meave, might bewitch him and kill him.

So at last brave Cuculain followed the wishes of those who loved him and went with Laeg to a secret glen in Ulster. There he was entertained the day and night long and games of chess were played to try to keep him from rushing back to his chariots and weapons and war-steeds. But the hero was restless and unhappy and if he had not plighted his word he would not have stayed in the Glen.

But the time came when the clan of Cailitin, the horrid shapes sent by Queen Meave to spy out Cuculain, found the hero and began their tormenting. Night after night they encircled him. And Cuculain

saw their forms in strange visions and heard their wild songs. The strange music continued and with it he heard the clear shrill notes of blown reeds, a martial music, the measured tread of marching men and the cries of captains. And these voices called to Cuculain to leave the glen and go forth to battle.

Cuculain looked westward, and he saw a darkness moving towards him from the camp of Meave, and a deadly chill transfixed his heart as he looked, and a wild horror overspread his face and he knew it was not alone for the Red Branch he must fight, but for all the nations of Eire. Then in a vision, Cuculain saw his native land, sea-girt, like a picture, with all her tuaths and mor-tuaths, and, like silver threads he saw her everlasting streams; southwestward, the mighty Shannon running for its source at Connla's Well, where glistened the sacred hazel, and there eternally on watch and ward the fairy queens who guarded it, and he saw the Three Waters; the Suir, the Nore, and the Barrow, glittering through mid-Erin as they ran; the noble Slaney, too, he saw and the Liffey returning to its source, the lordly Boyne crowned with woods, and the palaces of the immortal gods; the Bann with its sacred estuary; the Drowis, and the Lee, silver-flowing, untroubled, like a dream, and the sacred mountains of Eire, and her plains and many woods, her sea-piercing promontories and storm-repelling bays. And Cuculain saw

her tribes and nations dwelling afar in happy labours employed singing as they wrought, and fleets of this, great and small, entering or leaving all her harbours, creeks and inlets, and the land like an emerald set in sapphire seas, lit with a strange light and sounding with a strange music like a single mighty harp with chords innumerable played upon by some unseen divine harper, and the land blest and happy in itself and a cause of blessing and happiness to the earth's ends.

And terrible was the scene that Cuculain encountered when he had left the secret glen and entered the world of men again. There approached him the flying scattered battalions of the Red Branch, driven on by the great host of Meave. Cuculain rushed to meet them and helped their broken bands to reunite and breathed into each man the strength of his own unconquered soul. At dawn of the next day the men of Meave saw him revealed in the light of the rising sun and they were confused and withdrew.

That day the great host pitched their camp in a clear space which was commanded by highlands. The sun set and not long after the moon rose and the stars began to shine, and the blue hills all around and the wide horizon were bathed in the moony glare. The whole host was silent, like the sea beneath the frosty stars when its waves fall down and are still.

After this Cuculain defeated the host of Meave in

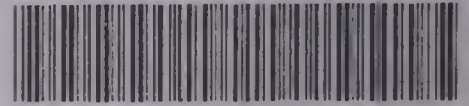
seven great battles. Many times he drove them southward but they were reinforced from other parts of Ireland and the men of Ulster who fell were not replaced. On the eighth day Cuculain looked round and saw the last of the Red Branch overwhelmed. Even then Cuculain rushed alone amidst the defeated ones, rousing them to a last battle. Like a great rock over which rolls some mighty billow of the western sea, so, was Cuculain swept down by the tide of the enemy. And as with the down-sinking billow, the same rock reappears in its greatness and stands again, so the Hound of Culain perpetually reappeared scattering and destroying his foes. In the midst of this horror, Cuculain beheld Laeg, his comrade, surrounded by a battalion and shouting for help. Cuculain hastened to defend him. As he leaped toward his faithful charioteer, a great javelin pierced his side, passing through his battle-shirt, and piercing at the same time the body of Laeg.

The sun darkened and the earth trembled. A wail of agony shrilled across the land and the vast host of Meave was smote by panic as the flame of valour that was Cuculain fell with his brave comrade, Laeg.

When the spirit went out of Laeg, Cuculain staggered toward a small lake near-by. There he drank a deep draught of the pure cold water. Afterwards he arose and walked toward a tall pillarstone. Removing his torn mantle he tied it around the pillar

fastening it beneath his arms in a loose knot. This he did that he might die still standing. Far away the host of Meave watched him, for they said that he was immortal and would never die. Half expecting him to wreak some dread vengeance, they retreated to a great distance. The rays of the setting sun showed him with his drawn sword gleaming. So he stood, a terror to his enemies even in death. Thus perished Cuculain, the child of promise that was prophesied unto the men of Ulster.

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